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A Man Like Him

Portrait of the Burmese Journalist, Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung

Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay

Ma Thanegi, translator

Cornell Southeast Asia Program

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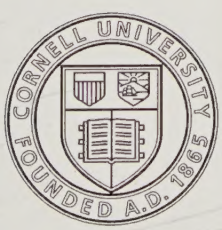
Portrait of the Burmese Journalist, Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung



Cornell University

Wedding day of U Chit Maung and Daw Ma Ma Lay

Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay
Ma Thanegi, translator

A Man Like Him

Portrait of the Burmese Journalist, Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung

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Daw Ma Ma Lay, with the high chignon fashionable in the 1930s

Portrait of Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung

Portrait of Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay
as a young widow

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Translator's Note

Ma Thanegi

Thu-lo Lu (A Man Like Him), is the story of the last eight years of Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung's life. This account was written ten months after his death in 1946 by his twenty-nine-year-old widow, Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay. It was first published in May 1947 and went through three printings in the same year. The tenth edition was published in 2003.

This young couple had published the prestigious *Journal Kyaw* weekly, and thus their names are forever associated with the paper. U Chit Maung was a great editor and committed patriot, and a brilliant, self-educated man who served his country well and who was deeply involved in politics from behind the scenes during the colonial period and the Japanese Occupation. He was a man who had no desire for power, position, or fame.

The eight short years of their union, from 1938 to 1946, covered a period of great change in the country, with the nationalist movement rising to the height of its fervor against British rule, followed by the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation.

Thu-lo Lu provides an insight into the politics and economy of Myanmar, as well as into the traditional relationships between parents and children, where personal pride has to give way in the face of love.

It is interesting to note the women's issues of that period, which are illuminated by this narrative, while at the same time learning about this unlikely romance between two very different personalities. Each word of this book shows how intensely they loved each other and how she supported him at all times. Theirs was a marriage of destiny. However, Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay herself was a much respected writer who achieved success in her own right and retained her identity and independence.

It is my privilege to translate this book, and the work has been a labor of love.

I am indebted to Dr. Daw Khin Lay Myint, professor of French, the daughter of U Chit Maung and Ma Ma Lay, and to the poet U Moe Hein, their son, for reading over the manuscript and making thoughtful suggestions.

I am also deeply grateful to Robert Taylor, who, busy as his schedule is, kindly took the time to write the introduction and edit my manuscript.

As I worked, my thoughts dwelt on my late uncle, journalist and editor Tetkatho Htin Gyi, who as a college newspaper reporter covered the 1938 students' demonstration, and who regaled me with stories of those times throughout my childhood. I am also indebted to my late friend Kyi Kyi Yin, known to many as "Ma," who introduced me to Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay's works when we were

students at the Institute of Economics. She and I are among the thousands of Myanmar women to whom Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay gave the strength to face life with courage. With this work, I am but repaying a minute amount of the debt that my friends and I owe to the writer.

In this translation, I have added footnotes to explain some Burmese terms, to provide biographical and geographical data, or to clarify historical facts. The name "Burma" was coined by the British through hearing the word "Bama," the name of the majority race. I have used the word "Myanmar" for the name of our country, since for centuries "Myanmar" has been its local name, a name first recorded on a stone inscription in 1235 AD and in use since that time. Also, I have used the original name "Yangon," which means "End of Strife," instead of "Rangoon." Some anglicized names remain unchanged where relevant.

A note for the reader: Myanmar proper names for an adult man are prefixed with the honorific, "U," pronounced "Oo," and for a woman, "Daw." When addressing a young man, one uses the prefix "Ko," or "Maung," and for a young woman, one uses "Ma." Sometimes "Maung" or "Ma" may be adopted as part of a person's pen name or performing name. Very close friends or family members may ignore the use of prefixes in addressing or referring to those younger than themselves, but it is never acceptable to address or refer to a person who is older without using the honorific prefix. In the text, a particular character may be identified with different prefixes; for instance, in one situation U Chit Maung refers to U Ba Hnin as "Ko Ba Hnin" when speaking informally.

"Thakin" for men and "Thakin-ma" for women were nationalist prefixes meaning "Master," used by Myanmar politicians during their fight for independence.

The Burmese do not take on family names. Each person has his or her own given name, and the same names recur frequently throughout the population. Also, a person can change his or her name to reflect his or her experiences, as noted above.

FOREWORD
Moe Hein

Thu-lo Lu, what a blessing that you have come out in an English version! My long-awaited desire now becomes a reality, though not of my making. I wanted so fervently to translate you myself ... who else would be as eager? Whenever I am introduced as my parents' child, the first word uttered by anyone having read you would be your name: *Thu-lo Lu.*

To all readers, you are an inspiration and role model, as they so often tell me. So what then held me back from translating? Two things. First, my head knew it was not competent to take up the task and, second, my heart feared the flood of feelings that would be unleashed, for within you both my parents are embodied. My mind would be laden with memories and feelings. In such a position, I cannot trust my hand. Sentimental—subjective—one may call me. But truly, I would be at a loss and the work a failure. You are far beyond my reach.

Now, fate has been so good as to provide a hand capable of mastering the task. With a strong spirit driving hard to fulfill its aim, this hand has transformed you, *Thu-lo Lu,* into a work for international presentation, thereby enabling you to cross all frontiers. The skilled work of the translator exactly reflects the tone and tempo of the original writer, and many more readers can now enjoy you. Moreover, footnotes and explanations are provided to give a fuller picture. What more could be expected? With heart and soul, the hand has painstakingly labored. It is a work of dedication and no less a work of art. Even if I had attempted to translate, I could not have done better.

When my eyes first fell upon the translated manuscript, I was reawakened. As before, *Thu-lo Lu,* you have brought back to life the ones I love. I see them, hear them, and feel them. Reborn am I! A man over sixty is simply reduced to a child of six. Tears of joy and sadness well up as I see my parents again in this translation.

Thu-lo Lu, in the same way that you have inspired many a reader in the past, so will you in the future. Your characters died long ago, but they are not dead, for in you they live. They continue to strengthen the morale and morals of readers through you.

What a blessing! Fate honors you with a translation, fate honors the hand that accomplished the work. As for me, I feel I do not even deserve this page, even though kindly offered. All in all, the two hands, one that first brought you to life and another that led you further, will leave a lasting imprint upon your readers.

"To Serve and Sacrifice"

Moe Hein
Son of Journal Kyaw
April 2006

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

BY JOURNAL KYAW MA MA LAY

In the preparation of this book, I did not have the ease that I had with my earlier works. This book was begun in the month of Tabaung, ten months after the death of its central character, my husband, Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung. In the actual writing of it, I found that I could hardly continue from one paragraph to the next. As I began to write it after U Chit Maung was no more with me, my heart felt as if it were burning, and this hampered my writing and delayed the completion of the book.

When I had previously advertised in the *Journal Kyaw* an upcoming book titled "A Man like Him," I had not meant this particular one. Instead, the title had been chosen for a novel intended to be a guide for young women in the choosing of marriage partners. Ultimately, if it had not been for someone who persuaded and entreated me to write about U Chit Maung, this book using the same title would not have been written.

Out of love and respect for my husband who had been his mentor, Tetkatho Ko Myo Thant repeatedly exhorted me to write this story about him—to show that someone of his stamp had lived and breathed, and to title it "A Man Like Him." There are other reasons, as Ko Myo Thant explained to me: in the recently published *Diary of U Chit Maung*, there is a poem in which he spoke of the extraordinary way in which he met me, the person destined to one day become his wife—

"Coming to know you, through what fate ordained from times past ..."—surely, Ko Myo Thant said, those who read this poem would wish to know the details of this first encounter.

Then, he said that, U Chit Maung having been a veritable storehouse of knowledge, his biography would have been full of illuminating and noteworthy facts. As he had been so uncomfortably shy in the presence of women as to earn the moniker of "monk," his "love story" would certainly be out of the ordinary, something that people would be exceedingly curious to know about. Ko Myo Thant also repeatedly argued that such vignettes from his life—from the time he met his destined wife to his last moments—would be of interest to his children and to other readers.

Therefore, since Ko Myo Thant was very persistent, and as I myself believed that my husband's biography should be written, this book has been produced and presented to my readers.

Innumerable biographies and autobiographies of prominent people have existed in the West since ages past. However, such works have not emerged in Myanmar, and I wondered whether I might not be too far ahead of the times in penning

something like this. I also had to weigh the benefits of revealing a late person's private affairs to the reading public.

However, it so happened that when U Chit Maung was alive, the two of us had promised each other that one day we would present each other with our life stories titled "My Husband" and "My Wife," respectively, and this really was the main reason for this book. Ever since that promise, every single day I had recorded all that I could about U Chit Maung with the writing of such a book in mind. However, the files of those records, meticulously maintained since our marriage, were partially lost when the house where we had been living during the Japanese Occupation, opposite the Teachers' Training College on Pyay Road, was heavily bombed shortly before the British reoccupation of Myanmar towards the end of World War II. I was heartbroken after this destruction of the fruits of nine years of laborious record keeping, and I despaired of ever producing the book in mind. But now, although it is not a full biography, this volume has come into being, and my initial objective has been fulfilled, although not in full, as I had hoped to do.

This work is not one of fiction written purely to arouse a reader's interest but is about real events. After the readers have gone through both volumes I and II[1] of this work, it is for them to decide if they have in fact found it interesting.

1309, Fifth Waning Moon Day of Kason
May 9, 1947

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[1] The original edition of *Thu-lo Lu* was published in two volumes.

Biography of Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung

U Chit Maung was born in 1912 in Oke Po, central Myanmar, to U Mya and Daw Saw Yu. When U Chit Maung finished high school, he was three years too young to be eligible for college. During the wait to attend college, he worked as a teacher at his own school and read all he could independently. While in his late teens, he moved to Yangon, applied for an opening at *Nawrahta* newspaper, and was hired as soon as he applied, even at such a tender age. When this paper folded, he went to work for *Myanmar Alin,* where he became chief editor, a post he held for many years without using the title. However, in 1940 he fell out with the publishers, who he felt were infringing on his rights as a journalist, and he left the paper, although he would still speak out on its behalf when necessary.

Thereafter, along with his wife, Daw Tin Hlaing (also called Ma Ma Lay), whom he had married in 1938, he published a weekly paper called *Journal Kyaw,* or *The Weekly Thunderer.* The paper became highly popular, as it was strongly supportive of the nationalistic movement and the rights of the poor. From that time, he became known as Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung and his wife as Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay.

U Chit Maung wrote several novels and a few nonfiction political works. His novel *Thu* (He) became an instant bestseller and is regarded as a classic of Myanmar literature. It was made into a feature movie that enjoyed box-office success.

During the Japanese Occupation, his intelligence work was unknown to others apart from a very few. He later joined the executive committee of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League party (AFPFL), formed under General Aung San, and was active in the fight for independence. Many of his suggestions were used in the demands submitted to the British. All his life, his goal was to serve his country without any wish for a political role or recognition. His diary entries and his last satirical poem were testaments, among many other works, of his lifelong disgust with the corruption that so often results from power.

He passed away on April 3, 1946, at the age of thirty-four, after a short illness, one year and nine months before Myanmar gained independence. He remains a highly respected figure and role model for generations of men and women of Myanmar.

Biography of Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay

Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay, the fourth child of Dawson Bank manager U Pyar Cho and Daw Kwi, was born on April 13, 1917, in Kamar Kalu, a village of the Bogalay township. Her given name was Ma Tin Hlaing. She finished middle school in Bogalay, where her father worked, and then studied up to the ninth grade (1932) at Yangon's Myoma Girls' High School. In 1938 she married U Chit Maung, chief editor of *Myanmar Alin*.

In 1946, U Chit Maung passed away, leaving behind his wife, a daughter, and two sons.

In 1959, Ma Ma Lay married U Aung Zeya, who took care of her the way she had taken care of U Chit Maung.

As a young girl, Ma Tin Hlaing was active in nationalistic activities in Bogalay, experiences from which she drew for her famous novel *Mon-yway Mahu* (which was translated into English as "Not Out of Hate"). The same book was also translated into French by her daughter, Daw Khin Lay Myint, who was a professor of French, under the title *La mal Aimée*.

Ma Ma Lay was the co-publisher of *Journal Kyaw* and editor for both the *Journal Kyaw* and *Pyi-thu hit-taing* papers (1939), vice chair of the Women's Pen Club and editor of *Writers' Magazine* (1947), chair of the Union of Myanmar Journalists Association (1948–49), and secretary of the Union of Myanmar Writers' Club (1961–62). Besides her novels, Ma Ma Lay wrote many short stories. She used the pen name Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay, adopting the title of the journal that she helped publish, in the same way that her first husband was known as Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung. She was also a renowned and successful indigenous medicine healer.

In spite of her well-to-do background, she often wrote about poverty-stricken urban workers or peasants. For those pieces she did extensive research, and few other writers managed to capture and convey the details that make her subjects seem to come to life. Almost all of her writings addressed the role of women in society and the workplace. In her time, the majority of writings were "Pyin nyar pay," that is, "educational" works to teach the young about issues of morality, and *A Man Like Him* is no different.

While Ma Ma Lay supported the traditional social norms of decorous behavior for women and thought that women should fulfill their "housewifely" duties, she nevertheless made a strong call for women to value intelligence and independence, and to have successful careers. She stood out among the other educated, gracious, and well-bred Burmese women of her day as a great writer and role model for many.

She passed away in Yangon on April 6, 1982.

Introduction

Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung and Myanmar's Late-Colonial Politics

by Robert H. Taylor

The decade prior to the death of Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung, in 1946, including the eight or so years described so effectively by his widow Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay in the book *Thu-lo Lu*, were among the most significant of Myanmar's turbulent twentieth century. The seeds then planted helped bring forth the British colony's tortured post-independence civil strife and the eventual rise of socialist autarky and military rule. These years witnessed the administrative separation of the Province of Burma from India; the introduction of a system of limited parliamentary democracy for the majority of the population; the growth of student and left-wing ideological ferment and radical nationalist agitation, international intrigue, and war; and, finally, the rise of armed resistance and multi-sided, mass political struggle verging on revolution. Whereas Myanmar commenced this period as an effective and outwardly prosperous colonial economy, it ended the era with its major industries and their markets devastated and its people suffering extreme economic deprivation. The legacy of those eventful years is still apparent in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

U Chit Maung and Daw Ma Ma Lay were at the center of those developments, as *Thu-lo Lu* makes clear, both chronicling events and attempting to guide them. The hugely different social and economic backgrounds of this unusual couple highlight one of the fascinating aspects of late-colonial Myanmar. While Daw Ma Ma Lay came from a prosperous family—her father worked for the only Myanmar-based, but British-owned, bank in the country, a major supplier of agricultural credit to the country's farmers—U Chit Maung was from a relatively impoverished small town in the central dry zone of the country. Their small-town origins, fierce independence, and keen intellects, as well as their mastery of English and desire to see an end to Myanmar's colonial status, were perhaps the only things this couple initially shared. As Daw Ma Ma Lay lived without want or care, reading books and magazines from

England in the midst of Myanmar's rice-growing Ayeyarwaddy delta, her lush environment stands in marked contrast to the arid circumstances of U Chit Maung's boyhood in Myanmar's dry-zone cultural heartland. While both came to develop a deep apprehension of the contemporary world and its challenges and opportunities, both never forgot their diverse Myanmar origins.

The complexity of the years described in the book is obvious from the tale itself. For those who are unfamiliar with the saga of Myanmar's late-colonial political economy and social history, it may well seem incredibly perplexing. It was a colony full of contradictions and conundrums. Despite the country's colonial status, the press was relatively free, and censorship of books and other published material did not become onerous until the beginning of the Second World War and the introduction of the Defense of Burma Act and Rules after 1939. The British were so confident of their power and the stability of their empire that the existence in Burma of a free nationalist press and the development of political parties, some with their own "private armies" of unarmed supporters, was not seen as a major threat. The introduction of electoral politics in the early 1920s and the expansion of elected ministers' powers in a Westminster-style cabinet government following the introduction of the Government of Burma Act on April 1, 1937, were seen as steps in Myanmar's inevitable, but still distant, evolution as a self-governing dominion of the British Empire. As long as the British- and Indian-dominated civil service "held the ring," and the British governor maintained sole authority over defense, finance, and the separate administration of the Shan States and the frontier areas in the north of the country, Myanmar politicians were allowed to play the parliamentary game with as much bravado and money as they could muster. The massive peasant revolt known as the Saya San rebellion (1930–32) was the only event prior to the Second World War to raise doubts about the perpetuity of British rule. When the British suppressed that huge outpouring of peasant discontent, they suggested agrarian reforms, but Myanmar nationalists drew very different and much more radical lessons from that violent episode.

Similarly, the University of Yangon, though viewed by the business community and other conservative groups as a hotbed of subversion, enjoyed relative academic freedom, a situation that encouraged its students to debate widely on the ideological and political issues of the day. Their British and Indian teachers watched with a benign tolerance, which was only occasionally challenged by the most vociferous nationalists, as the students organized themselves in the student union and published newspapers critical of their education. The faculty's benign tolerance merely served to increase the radical energies of those Myanmar students who had come from provincial towns to what was in many ways an alien city, an alien university, and an alien existence. The education offered to them they described as a "slave" education, designed to entrap their spirits rather than liberate their minds and their country. Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung's reference to G. E. Harvey's widely read *History of Burma*[1] reflected this situation. Harvey claimed that the British had "saved Burma," evoking the question, "saved the colony from what and for whom?" The answer was sought not in the classroom but in the books and magazines of British, Indian, and Burmese left-wing writers, which were readily available and

[1] G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1925).

which intellectuals like U Chit Maung knew well. The 1930s was an ideological age all the world over, and Myanmar fully shared in its debates.

Imagine the impression on a late adolescent who, having gained admission to his country's most prestigious educational institution, discovered that most of his or her teachers were Indians or British. To suffer the apparent disdain of sophisticated urbanites might be difficult for a country lad or lass to bear. To be told that one's ancestors were incapable of preserving their own civilization without foreign rule must have been unbearable. Imagine the anger that would rise in one when most of the officials one dealt with on a daily basis in one's capital city were foreigners. Even the language spoken in its major market city was foreign—Hindi rather than Burmese—and the language of government was foreign—English, not Burmese. In the 1930s, half of Yangon's population was composed of Hindus and Muslims of South Asian descent, now called Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis, who had come to live among the Theravada Buddhists of Myanmar. Yangon at that time was the second busiest port in the world for immigration, as thousands of South Asians entered and left the colony each year, with increasing numbers settling permanently and competing for the jobs and land that the indigenous population considered theirs. The resulting economic and social competition fueled the racial and religious riots that are described so graphically in *Thu-lo Lu*.

The mixture of student radicalism, feeding on nationalist and Marxist publications, and racial conflict, fueled by religious discord and economic competition, provided a volatile source of support for politicians playing the parliamentary game that the British declared open to all who agreed to stay within the rules. The two politicians who dominated that game until the Japanese declared it over in 1942 were Dr. Ba Maw and U Saw. These two rivals, and their maneuverings, are part of the backdrop to the early political events that Daw Ma Ma Lay describes U Chit Maung attempting to mastermind and criticize, both in his journalism and in his capacity as a political advisor. The parliament elected Ba Maw the country's first premier in 1937. U Saw, who lacked Ba Maw's intellectual finesse and stylish manners, nevertheless possessed an instinct for grasping a political opportunity, creating a political force, and remaking the balance of power in his own interest. He soon set out to do so.

These two rivals made and broke alliances with nationalist youths such as Thakin Aung San and other leaders of the Yangon University Students' Union and the Do Bama Asi-ayon (We Burmans Association) in order to unseat their rivals and gain power for themselves. When Dr. Ba Maw dominated the parliament, U Saw plotted to bring him down with the assistance of students who despised them both—and made that clear rhetorically—for playing the British parliamentary game and seemingly being their willing stooges. When U Saw strode to power on the backs of the students, and with a little help from his Japanese, Chinese, and Myanmar financial backers, he watched Dr. Ba Maw form an alliance with the students known as the Freedom Bloc. Happy to work with the British whom he had previously denounced so forcefully with Thakin Aung San at his elbow, U Saw, when he reached the top job, embraced the Defense of Burma Rules that the Governor handed him to suppress his political opponents and erstwhile allies, eventually even canceling scheduled parliamentary elections. These events and many others like them took place during the first half of the decade that *Thu-lo Lu* documents.

The second half of that decade commenced with the bombing of Yangon by the Japanese in December 1941 and January 1942. The confidence of the colonial state in

its ability to keep in check the nationalist energies and racial antagonisms was part of the same self-satisfaction that created the complacent belief that there was no possibility that international conflict could disrupt their world. The speed with which the Second World War engulfed Myanmar was not only unexpected but also unprecedented. The British were completely incapable of defending their colony, and thousands of persons, British and South Asians, were forced to flee ignominiously in the first four months of 1942—by sea if lucky, on foot if not—to India. Thousands died along the way. Three years later, in 1945, the British returned to a different country, one in which they could no longer preside with moral and military self-confidence, but where they were instead overwhelmed by the radical nationalism that they had so indifferently ignored in the first half of Daw Ma Ma Lay's and U Chit Maung's exciting decade together.

How did this quick turnabout occur? Again, the story is complex. Before the Japanese invaded British Myanmar, they prepared a means to undermine the British short of war. Primarily this was through providing military training to a small group, eventually thirty individuals, nationalist youths from the larger "leftist" Kodaw Hmaing faction of the Do Bama Asi-ayon and the smaller, anti-socialist Ba Sein faction of the organization. This was done by spiriting individuals such as Thakin Aung San, Thakin Ye Htut, Thakin Hla Pe, Thakin Hla Maung, and Thakin Shu Maung (later Bo Gyoke or General Ne Win) to Hainan Island for specialized training. When the Japanese war in South East Asia proceeded far more easily than expected, and the Japanese decided to take the war to the Indian border, the Thirty Comrades, as they became known, became the nucleus of an indigenous army that was raised on the march from Bangkok into Myanmar via Tanintharyi (Tenasserim) in the first months of 1942. The Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, were thus born.

Promised independence by their Japanese mentors, the Burma Independence Army (BIA), led by Thakin, then Bo Gyoke Aung San, assumed they had the right to rule. The Japanese thought otherwise, and they soon had to rein in the force they had unleashed by imposing an indigenous government of their choosing on the country. Thakin Tun Oke, one of the Thirty Comrades, was the first to head this imposed government but he was soon replaced by the irrepressible Dr. Ba Maw. Ba Maw's nemesis, U Saw, spent the war in a British prison in Uganda, having been caught promising the Japanese that he would raise his own army to assist them. He had relayed this promise through the Japanese embassy in Lisbon on his way home from a failed mission to London and Washington, DC, during which he had demanded a promise of dominion status for his country when the war was over.

The BIA, soon greatly reduced in size and renamed the Burma National Army (BNA), became a new factor in Myanmar's overt political and institutional life. During this same time, the Communist Party of Burma (BCP) arose, also born in the midst of the defeat of the British and the victory of the Japanese. The BCP, founded in 1939 by Aung San, had several other figures who aspired to lead it with their own ideological and programmatic policies. With Aung San now in charge of the budding Myanmar military, one Communist faction, led by Thakin Than Tun, who served as Minister of Agriculture during the Japanese era, organized the country's restive agrarian population as a potential political force. Than Tun also became Aung San's brother-in-law, the two men marrying sisters in the midst of the Japanese-sponsored interlude when Dr. Ba Maw presided as the Adipati Ashin Mingyi. The other faction was led by the irrepressible Thakin Soe. Soe, the originator of many of the Marxist-cum-Buddhist concepts that formed the heart of Myanmar socialist rhetoric for years

after his political demise, refused to ally himself with the "Fascist Japanese." At the start of the war, he and his followers went underground and began organizing a resistance movement against the Japanese. His group also dispatched Thakin Thein Pe (Myint), U Chit Maung's interlocutor at several points in *Thu-lo Lu*, to India, where he joined up with British military intelligence to lay the groundwork for an eventual temporary alliance between these diverse Myanmar nationalist forces and the British against the Japanese.

After independence came to Myanmar just six years after the Japanese invasion, all of these young men were to be involved in leading one or another of the major political forces of the country's incipient civil war that Daw Ma Ma Lay anticipates in the months prior to U Chit Maung's premature death. In the first half of the 1940s, they were all still in their late twenties and early thirties, having led the Students Union and the Do Bama Asi-ayon in street protests against the British and in support of various older established political figures such as U Saw and Dr. Ba Maw just a few years before. Myanmar's politics was in the midst of a revolution that resulted in the replacement of an older generation of political leaders and thrust remarkably young men into positions of authority for which they admitted they were poorly prepared. The generation they replaced, whose members had collaborated with the British and come to be perceived as largely unworthy of respect in the new nationalist Myanmar, was discarded in the rush to independence. The official and unofficial historiography of Myanmar has tended to reflect this view.

Among the many events that Daw Ma Ma Lay describes in *Thu-lo Lu*, three stand out as deserving fuller consideration. One is the 1938 Revolution, or Ayeidawbon; the second is the move of their family to Bogalay and the arrival of the BIA to the town in the wake of the British withdrawal; the third is the return of the British to Yangon and the maneuverings within the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) that she so ambiguously describes. Each of these events highlights an aspect of history that both fiction and honest memoir of the kind represented by *Thu-lo Lu* are much better at capturing than formal academic analysis would be. Historians and political scientists look for patterns and categories into which political actors can be slotted in order to create a narrative order out of the chaos of events. Official and unofficial hagiography uses this same device to justify praise for one party or individual and condemnation of all others. That heroes lead parties and armies, and villains organize plots and sabotage, is easier to believe if you were not in the midst of the human drama of the kind that rapid political change creates. Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay makes it clear that this kind of historical analysis denies the complexity of actual events, and she reminds us of the human factor in any historical occurrence. Friendships and personal interests usually outrank ideologies and policies in conditions where there are no established rules nor clear codes of procedure.

The 1938 Ayeidawbon is recorded in the annals of Myanmar's prewar politics as a somewhat less significant event than either the 1920 Students Strike over the allegedly elitist nature of the Yangon University Act or the 1936 student strike over the expulsion of student journalists Nu and Aung San for refusing to reveal the author of a potentially libelous article in the Student Union magazine critical of the personal behavior of a university teacher. Though few of the future rulers of Myanmar took leading roles in the 1938 Ayeidawbon, it was an important development, as it brought together student nationalists with worker politics in a broad coalition, creating the illusion of being a broad revolutionary force. It was also an object lesson and a model for future student and worker protests into the 1990s. U

Chit Maung was a role model for many political aspirants who viewed him as a smart politician and journalist. *Thu-lo Lu* was on the reading lists for discussion by many of the leftist, usually Communist-affiliated, reading circles that persisted in socialist Myanmar during the 1970s and 1980s. Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung continues to be a role model for young people, many of whom are political aspirants who view him as a sensible politician and journalist.

During the course of 1938, students led by Yangon University Students' Union Chairman Thakin Hla Pe, the future Bo Let Yar, traveled to Yeinanchaung, the heart of the Myanmar oil industry, and joined striking oil field workers in a march on Yangon that terminated at the Shwedagon Pagoda, the center of the country's protest politics. The inability of the government to control the situation led to the eventual rise of U Saw as premier, but the turmoil also led to a split in the Do Bama Asi-ayon just as it replaced the Students' Union at the heart of youthful political organization. Being part of a movement that helped change a government, but did not undermine British control, forced the leaders of the Do Bama Asi-ayon to rethink their political strategies. This lesson gave rise to the conspiratorial politics that resulted in the founding of the Communist Party by Aung San and others in 1939 and the Freedom Block by Dr. Ba Maw and his new youthful allies in 1940, and eventually to the BIA. Ideological positions were of little importance to individuals as they sought allies and strategies for ending colonial rule in whatever role it adopted, benign or not. *Thu-lo Lu* captures some of the fluid alliances to which U Chit Maung's younger associates were drawn and concerning which he advised them.

At the end of the volume, one finds described a similar period of plotting and scheming for position and power in the country's final effort to end the grip of imperialism on Myanmar. That complex period would require a lengthy essay to describe at all adequately or objectively. Allies and associates from prewar and wartime politics now came together in one great national coalition, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), to force out the British. The leaders of the disparate forces that had been born in student and Do Bama Asi-ayon politics and factionalism in the late 1930s and in the formation of the Burma Independence Army and the fissiparous Communist movement during the war years realized that they were on the cusp of independence if only they could remain united against the British.

At the same time, they all also realized that if the AFPFL succeeded in its nationalist quest, some of them would become the nation's first post independence leaders and shapers. Relationships of trust and animosity that had been established, broken, and reestablished in the previous decade of student union and covert politicking now became the basis on which coalitions were built and future positions established. The premature death of Bo Gyoke Aung San, killed by an assassin's bullets just fourteen months after he delivered U Chit Maung's funeral eulogy in April 1946, has elevated him to a position of preeminence in that period that his rivals at the time would not have recognized. Daw Ma Ma Lay only hints at these conflicts, but the hints are clear enough to draw our attention to the intrigues of the period.

The 1938 Ayeidawpon and the 1945–47 AFPFL independence struggle provided dramatic scenes of intrigue and conflict connected to well-known events in Myanmar's political history. The struggle for physical security that occurred in Bogalay during the 1942 invasion, though little known but repeated in towns across the country, better reveals the underlying sociopolitical reality of the times. Here the

personal and the familial replace sweeping ideological categories like the "workers and the peasants," "the capitalists and the landlords." Though U Chit Maung considered himself both a Buddhist and a Communist, he was also an admirer of good government and sound administration, which he thought ought to insure the protection of personal property. As it became apparent that the British administration was about to collapse in the face of the joint Japanese-BIA rout of the British Indian army, U Chit Maung took steps to insure that the lives and property of the residents of Bogalay were protected from potential attack by "men from the surrounding villages and those across the river [who] gathered like flies and came into town holding knives and swords, bent on robbing the richer townspeople." "The sons of good families" rallied to protect those who had benefited from colonial rule from potentially losing their property to the underclass that had felt a spot of looting was justifiable as it would rebalance the wealth of the community.

U Chit Maung also dreaded the coming to power of his friends and advisees from the Do Bama Asi-ayon as they marched into Bogalay wearing the uniforms of the BIA and brandishing their guns with the bravado of the victorious. When Bo Yan Naing, the soon-to-be son-in-law of Dr. Ba Maw, ordered the "sons of the good families" to surrender their arms to a new BIA-dominated administration, U Chit Maung sensed danger. He reveals his fears when he tells Daw Ma Ma Lay:

> We need some sort of administration set up for the town. The Thakin are not going to allow the officials of the previous government to take any posts, they will want to form it amongst themselves. If they form an administration with people of little or no ability, the town will suffer. The administration must be entrusted to these officials, with the Thakins holding the strings, and that's the only way to have a stable and strong administration. If these men of experience are left out altogether all over the country, they will have no place to go, if they have not left with the British. Or they may well side with the Japanese. Then the country will continue to suffer without able men in places where they are needed. What a great shame that nothing was prepared for a situation like this!

His recognition of the need for competent and stable administration, even if tainted by prior contact with the colonial power, and his despair at the lack of preparations to provide such a government in the wake of the invasion, heralds one of the tragedies of modern Myanmar's history. The effort to find a system of rule that provides for the well-being of the population and provides them with the day-to-day security and protection that are required to live a productive and satisfying life has yet to be fully resolved. This is a lesson that can be drawn from *Thu-lo Lu* by those living more than half a century after the book was written. The advantage of hindsight was, of course, not available to the individuals caught up in the drama of events that Daw Ma Ma Lay describes in these pages. They had more pressing and immediate issues to face.

Robert H. Taylor
Yangon
July 19, 2008

A Man Like Him

(Thu-lo Lu)

CHAPTER 1

REPLY FROM *MYANMAR ALIN*[1]

The day was May 18, 1936.

I was returning with my family by boat from the monastery of Dhamma Thuka Village after taking the Buddhist precepts in the presence of the Sayadaw.[2]

On both sides of the riverbank we would frequently pass by huddles of decrepit bamboo huts. The land stretched as far as the eye could see with *danni*[3] and bamboo thickets and wild weeds growing all over. The dwellings for human habitation could not make any use of this space: the huts, constructed out of bamboo and *danni*, were just large enough for a few people to crawl in. I saw none that was strongly built: the huts were all ramshackle and leaning sideways in decay. These homes were not in the wilds of the country, nor were the villages on the far borders. They were homes for the poor of Myanmar living not too far from the towns. Their living conditions were barely of human standards; only because they had been born human could they be considered such, for they did not enjoy a life worthy of humans, nor did they have any rights.

The wind carrying the scent of rain swept over us, and waves rose in the river to slap against the sides of the boat, which rolled and dipped. The man at the helm steered the boat closer to the bank as we continued our journey.

It was more heartbreaking to see these villagers up close. What wrenched my heart most was the children of six, eight, or ten years digging for crabs in the mud with their bare hands. Some were casting nets at the water's edge. None of them had any clothes on, and they were all covered with mud. We went past them, but their images remained in my mind. A life such as this in childhood and then, what sort of life would they face when they grew up? Their bodies might grow but not their circumstances, nor their skills ... why were they stuck hopelessly in such a life? How could they be saved?

I was twenty years old at the time and no longer had childish fancies. I was by then beginning to make use of my mind. I stared at the waves, unwilling to look towards the riverbanks. I felt confused and unhappy as my mind whirled with thoughts and my eyes stared at the churning waves. The idea I had seemed to slip out of my mind and to fall into the depths of the river; then I felt as if something inside me was trying to grasp the thought again so as not to let go of it completely.

My thought was that maybe the newspapers and the young politicians could somehow help to turn around the life of these people into one fit for human beings ... I have never forgotten my thoughts of that day, as it happened to be the very same day that my life, too, would completely change.

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[1] A newspaper, "New Light of Myanmar."

[2] An abbot.

[3] A kind of reed, with leaves that are used as roofing.

We got back home about six in the evening to Bogalay.[4] Just as I was about to mount the steps to our house, the doorman handed me a letter that had come by post. I stared at the envelope and for a moment forgot to open it as my thoughts raced.

About five months ago, I had disagreed with something declared by a group of women in my town and had written an article explaining my views.[5] I had posted it off to the *Myanmar Alin* newspaper: it was the first article I had ever written and sent to a paper. I had no idea how to address the letter so I looked all over the paper and saw the title "Chief Editor: U[6] Sein" on the front cover and "Executive Publisher: Maung[7] Chit Maung" on the back. Still not sure to whom I should address it, I had written "To, U Editor" on both the envelope and at the beginning of the letter.

For about a week I kept my eyes out for the paper and the post to see if my article would appear, or if I would receive a reply by mail. When nothing happened, I assumed they did not want to publish my article or bother to reply, and I forgot all about it. But today ... I stared in fascination at the envelope printed with the newspaper's name, hesitating to open it immediately. Only when my family members began to ask "What's that? Where is it from?" did I come to my senses and, running up the stairs to my room, I flung myself on my bed and opened the letter.

To:
Ma Tin Tin[8]
Care of Dawson Bank[9]
Bogalay

Your letter of 22 January was mistakenly discarded with other letters and we came upon it only just now.

We cannot decide if the contents of the article are still relevant but we felt that it might be too late. Only you can know and that is the reason we are writing to you for confirmation. If the said fifteen-member women's group still exists and if what you wrote is still relevant, we could publish this letter in the "Clarion" column. If however it is too late please let us know.

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[4] A town in the delta where the writer lived.

[5] An anonymous letter was sent to Ma Tin Hlaing, signed by "a group of fifteen women," condemning her for "unladylike behavior" for playing badminton with boys her age. This group had threatened that if she continued to be so "shameless," they would write about her in the *Myanmar Alin* to humiliate her, at which point she decided to write her view on sports and platonic friendship between opposite sexes and submit her response to the same newspaper.

[6] Equivalent to "Mr.," a polite prefix used for men's names. For women, it would be "Daw." Both are compulsory when addressing someone who is older and not on familiar terms. When speaking to someone older who is familiar, one would address that person as "Uncle" or "Aunt," or "Elder Brother" or "Elder Sister," as appropriate.

[7] Male prefix for a name used for the young or as a sign of modesty.

[8] As her legal name was Ma Tin Hlaing, it would be normal to use the diminutive "Tin Tin" in unofficial and informal situations.

[9] The British-owned bank where Ma Tin Hlaing's father worked owned about 60,000 acres of paddy land and gave loans to farmers. Dawson's Bank was the only alternative to the Indian Chettiar moneylenders for most farmers in colonial Myanmar.

Please forgive us that the assistant editors, thinking your letter unimportant, had discarded it.

Chit Maung
Editor–Myanmar Alin
May 17

The letter was clear enough to understand with one reading but I read it repeatedly, losing count of how many times I did so. I was wondering why a letter sent in January and discarded by an assistant editor was nearly five months later discovered by this editor and why he would want to reply to it at all.

I replied that the subject was no longer relevant, but to my own surprise I somehow knew the editor would write to me again. As I thought, nearly three months later another letter came.

I reply to Ma Tin Tin,[10]

In your reply to us, you wrote that you would write another article to promote women's issues to be published in the newspaper, and we were hoping to receive the said article. However, since we did not hear from you, we felt it might be due to our fault in not replying sooner.

We are already planning to publish articles written by women on women's issues, and as you also said in your letter that you wanted to, we would like your article to be the first in the series. Please feel free to write on any subject. When you do, if it is longer than one and a half foolscap pages we would not be able to print it, so I would advise you to make your article short and to the point.

If you have no objection, please also include your photo so that if necessary we could use it.

When you post the article, please send it directly addressed to me.

Please stay healthy.

We wish you well.

Chit Maung
Editor–Myanmar Alin
August 16

[10] This is an old-fashioned, respectful form of salutation.

Chapter 2

About Myself

To tell you something about myself, I am the middle of five children, and after I left school, unlike my sisters who worked at the bank, I had more free time. I spent it reading newspapers and monthly magazines, all new fiction as well as classical prose and poetry.

My parents were not very wealthy, but if I were to describe our lifestyle without stating the actual expenditure, I could say that we lived with comfort and standards on a par with the British, with modern facilities in a well-set-up house. My father worked in a position usually filled by the British, and besides, we lived in the same building as the bank he worked at, so we existed in close proximity with the Westerners. As for housework, we had enough household staff so that there was nothing for us to do. My mother ministered to the needs of this big family in this big house, so we only had to comply with her rules of behavior and discipline in dress and for mealtimes; otherwise we were free to do what we wanted.

I enjoy wearing expensive clothes. Even if I were staying at home, I like to dress well. My cupboards were packed with clothes, and every day I would try to look my best in different fabrics and colors. My elder and younger sisters who worked with my father in the bank on the ground floor of our building also dressed well, so we shared this interest in fashion. However, our personalities and interests differed widely, as I am very active and outgoing, and so I was somewhat aloof from them. They are gentle of manner and soft of heart and reserved; they liked peace and harmony above all. As for me, if there is unfairness, I could not keep quiet about it. I must have my way in things I wanted to do, and I would not rest content until an unfair situation, big or small, had been justly resolved. I used to be stubbornly disdainful of what others say and had the grim patience to hold on to something even if I should suffer in the process. I made my own decisions and did exactly as I wanted, and such were the things that set me apart from my gentle sisters.

My mother could not condone some of my traits and would impose rules on me. I would carefully consider these rules decreed especially for my benefit, to see whether they were really necessary or fair. If any one of her rules was made out of anxiety for my sake, then, although not liking it, I would not rebel against it. I promised to myself that one day I would ease her mind concerning these anxieties. My vow to myself that one day she would be free of any worries for me gave me the strength I needed.

Some people gossiped that I would turn out badly if I were allowed so much freedom, in a way putting freedom in a bad light. Nevertheless, I wanted to lead my own life and be free to live, speak, and do as I wished. I could not even imagine living according to other people's wishes. They were only looking at what they saw on the surface, and, as I knew my own innermost thoughts full well, I was confident that I did not owe them any explanation. On the other hand, I had one personality

trait that made me different from them: I am known throughout my extended family of distant relatives for my kindness and generosity in sharing what I have with others. I could not look at or speak with anyone, man or woman, who was stingy, and merely to hear about them would fill me with dismay at their mean-mindedness. This was my character, and my main interest, as mentioned above, was reading.

I enjoyed it so much that apart from talking my meals and taking baths I only wanted to sit and read. My parents did not like me reading fiction and would forbid it most strongly.[1]

According to traditions of respect, I did not want to rebel openly against my parents' wishes, so in their presence I did not touch the novels, but once out of their sight I devoured one book after another. At the same time, I looked into these books to find the reasons why novels were considered such a bad influence. When I came across passages describing vulgar behavior, I would reflect that such were the words my parents wished me not to see, but then, rather biased in favor of my own enjoyment, I would decide that, after all, the writer merely wanted to be realistic. After finishing a novel, I would consider carefully how it began and ended, the story line, the writing—in fact everything about it. In my mind, I would delete or add scenes, change things around, and analyze the merits of the story and the writer. So, actually, I was not reading novels merely to entertain myself but I was studying the art of writing, although unaware of what I was doing.

I especially liked the epic poems: I loved how the words were chosen with care and strung into rhymes! I felt such admiration for the old poets, and their words were embedded in my heart. In school, our Burmese language teacher, Saya[2] Tin, encouraged me a lot. Thanks to him, I grew to love Burmese literature.

I was spending all my leisure in reading when my parents decided it was time for me to get married. By then my elder sister had married, and only my younger sister continued to work at the bank. My father had the idea that, not knowing which of his children one day would be running businesses of their own, each should learn accounting, and that was the reason he had his children work in the bank under him. My brothers and sisters followed his advice, but I had refused, saying I did not wish to serve under the British. My parents had apparently decided that this lady of leisure should find security in a marriage.

Since I was sixteen, I had been friends with someone, and I had decided that when we grew up and he became a man with enough qualifications to impress my parents, we would marry. I supported and encouraged him in many ways so that he would make something of himself. I had formed my own ideals concerning marriage that I told no one but kept secret in a corner of my mind. Whenever the question of marriage came up, these ideals would surface. The nonexistent man of my dreams, with the qualities I desired and the personality I admired, would loom in my mind whenever my marriage was mentioned.

I did try with the above-mentioned boy of my youth to turn him into the type of man I wanted: one with a good education, a generous and noble heart, integrity, and

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[1] Fiction available in Myanmar at the time was mostly romantic novels and was considered damaging to the morals of young girls.

[2] "Teacher," also a term of respect or politeness used when addressing men. "Saya" is the male form, "Sayama" the female. Both can be used as honorific titles for nurses, doctors, or superiors, and so forth, or as a polite form for manual laborers, such as for trishaw drivers and mechanics.

one who was as successful as any man could be, but to no avail: he did not live up to my expectations.

He, poor boy, had no idea of what sort of a person I was nor had he any inkling of my personality, but, merely blinded with love, he asked me to elope with him when he heard of the marriage plans my parents had for me. I felt deeply saddened that he did not consider how unlikely it was that a girl like me would disregard my parents' wishes and elope with him instead. I was dismayed that he had not tried to understand me and that he would think I would so easily agree to a husband of my parents' choosing.

After I told him that my marriage partner would have to please both my parents and myself, he gave up his efforts to marry me. I should say this was good for both of us: if our minds were not alike in the future, there would be serious problems. By giving me up, he also rid himself of further responsibilities, and I felt that for me, too, it was a wise turn in my life.

None of the men my parents proposed as candidates were anything like the partner of my imagination. They were wealthy, they were educated, they had looks and prestige, but I saw nothing out of the ordinary in them. None of them stood out as having a nobler personality or a more worthy nature that I could love. I refused all of them, telling my parents that if I married any of them, I would be spending my life wondering what I liked about my husband. My parents were completely at a loss. They did not know what to do with me, especially when they realized they could never force me into anything. They became increasingly anxious that I might do something rash, but they did not force my hand. They reasoned with me gently and said they would wait until I came to a decision, but at the same time they kept a close watch on me.

I could not begin to say how grateful I was to my parents at the time for not forcing me into something that would surely make me miserable. In gratitude, I vowed that I would only marry with my parents' approval.

Chapter 3

"What Do You Think of It?"

As I neared the age of twenty, my parents gave up any hope of getting me married off, and I continued to enjoy my freedom, reading books and learning much from them. From dawn till dusk I had no other work and nothing to worry about: it was a comfortable life, buying the clothes I wanted, eating what I liked, and traveling where I wanted to go. I had no problems with getting whatever I wanted, and all my wishes were easily fulfilled.

The second letter from the newspaper asking for an article as well as my photo placed me in a quandary. I was an avid reader, but no writer, and I was faced with a dilemma. I could not think of what to write. To send a photo was a great embarrassment for me, as I took it to mean sending it to a man, moreover, a total stranger. I did not believe I could write anything worthwhile, so without replying to the letter I let the matter drop. However, it was surprising that although I did not reply I felt certain that another letter would come, and my suspicion proved correct.

I write to you, Ma Tin Tin,

As there was no reply to my letter, I sent another enquiry after it. However, I still did not receive a reply, so I was worried that you might be ill or away on a trip or feel reluctant to reply. I am praying the last be not the reason, and I also pray that the first is not true.

My letters may be lacking in tact, or maybe they were too demanding: if due to their lack of anything you had no desire to reply, or if they were so demanding that you were upset, I can only apologize. Please at least reply to state the reason for your silence.

May I tell you of the high regard I have for you? I believe that it is not only the work of men to help enlighten the masses but that we will reach our goal of uplifting their lives when the women take part in this endeavor. The problems facing our country can be eased when women help to solve them. Men would try harder when women also change their attitudes. I would say so quite unabashedly that only with the support and encouragement of women do men go forth to conquer all.

So, as I am planning to have women write articles for our paper, it is a lucky chance to know you, albeit through the mail, and I am hoping to have a reply from you on this matter. I hope to awaken new thoughts among women through your writings. We do publish works by women writers when they are sent to us, but they are not as many as we hope to get, and they do not contain any trace of encouraging women to think for themselves, so I must keep on urging you to send us an article.

Through the article you sent us refuting the accusations of the fifteen-member women's committee, I could see that you have the wish to help your

country prosper and that you have the sharp intellect for it. This is the reason I am writing to you, and you can imagine how anxious I am when I receive no reply to my entreaties. I know very well that I have no right to compel you to write anything. I know I shall receive the article only when you decide to write it, but I am writing to you now to tell you how eager I am to have you write for us. Not only I but anyone who has a love for his country would want to depend upon someone like you who so clearly has the good of the people at heart.

At present, the Burmese are concentrating on politics to the detriment of their financial affairs, and it is up to the women who are capable of handling business issues to come to their rescue. I can only urge you to decide for yourself where you stand on this.

As for our country ...

"Have pity on the people I would not dare to say,
But why with saddened look do you keep hidden all you write?
How strange that your thoughts should be cloaked
With such dark clouds. I cannot think the reason ...
Do you still not forgive?
Please let me know, I urge with these sweet words ..."

Chit Maung
December 8

Because of this letter, I could no longer put it off, and I went over to my desk to prepare myself to write. The *Myanmar Alin* was the paper with the highest circulation [in the country], and the thought so terrified me that I could not think of a single thing. Not only that, but whatever I already had in my brain deserted me, and I could not begin to think of where to start.

Finally, I put the paper's importance out of my head and pretended I was just writing an essay for school, and only then did my brain begin to function. When I got past the difficult first sentence, I found that others followed easily. As he had warned I should not go beyond one and a half pages if I wanted it published, and as I was not used to this sort of limitation, it caused me great stress. Worse than that, when the article was done I had to consider under what name I should send it in.[1] The next day, I mailed off the article titled "To Have Brains with a Capital B" and wrote the writer's name as Yaway Hlaing. Each day I got up early to check on the paper before anyone got up; after two days it appeared in the paper, and I proudly kept looking at my words in print over and over again.

From that time onwards, every time he asked I would send off one or more articles. Each time when he wrote asking for more, and each time that I replied, we would exchange long letters, but so far we had no idea what the other looked like. We only wrote intense discussions on politics, education, and the like. We wrote modestly about ourselves and with respect for the other. In his letters there were always new things for me to learn, sometimes in the form of poems, and so for someone like me who was eager to learn, he served as a great library.

Whether he thought about me at all after reading my letters was not known to me, but his letters made me think about him. His letters were always thought provoking.

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[1] The majority of writers used pen names during that period.

I reply to you ...

In your letter number two, I could see the brilliance of your mind more clearly than ever before. In letter number one, I see your wit and in two I see your wisdom. So ... I feel a bit apprehensive about how I can continue writing to you ...

Men like to think that they are brighter than women but they dare not match wits if they meet a brilliant woman. Someone wrote once that men run to avoid meeting such a woman if they spot her even ten streets away!

There are many instances of men who have lost after challenging women to match instant rhymes.[2] *Now that I have encountered such a woman, I must reflect deeply on whether I should run at once or pretend to be of equal intellect and continue with my pose of being clever enough for her.*

Chit Maung
February 16

The whole letter honored me and humbled him, but I was rather of the mind that it was I who should be running away in fear. It seemed he pretended to be ignorant of things he really knew about. But then at times I could not make out his intentions clearly and felt as if I were reading too much into his words.

Dear Ma Tin Tin,

To my delight the political situation, by sheer accident, got better. In taking advantage of this state of affairs, I joyfully gave sound and sharp advice on how things should continue. For my pains, I have been condemned by someone as being part of a subversive act plotted by Dr. Ba Maw, and even taken to task that I had not said anything before.

The country seems unable to make up its mind. For just once, I stepped in and spoke out with nothing but sincere intentions and without any ulterior motive to heal the present political malaise and for that I am accused of malice! I am deeply saddened that these misunderstandings should arise.

I so wish to hear your political views. Before the window of opportunity passes, may I beg you to write for us something on the situation? If, however, you have no wish to write on it but would be willing to tell us your views, it would be of great value to someone who is involved in the matter.

In your letter, Ma Tin Tin, you said, "As you wrote that a woman who wants to better herself will surely succeed if she is as beautiful as she is intelligent, I take it to mean that a woman who is not beautiful could not go far with only her brains, and is there any hope for an intelligent woman without looks of ever succeeding?"

Seeing your photo in the special New Year edition of the paper, let me say that the classical poet Taungthaman U Hpay Nge has already judged you. There is a very elegant piece of poetry that to my knowledge had not appeared in print. U Hpay Nge's writings are quite exquisite: "In elegance, your manner pierces the soul of one who sees. Comparable to Ohnmar Dandi,[3] *your beauty knows no*

[2] Many examples are given, but they are impossible to translate as they are puns in verse.

[3] A legendary beauty.

bounds. Soft gold is your skin, [you are] someone who is as priceless as a precious ruby."

Now, I felt like trying to outdo this poet, but hours passed but not a sentence came to my mind, so I finally threw down my pen. But eventually a poem emerged that one could say is no equal with the one above. Nevertheless, just to show you how bad it is ... "In all the great forests, this rare orchid blooms, with a beauty no other flowers can hope to share. So noble and glorious, none would dare pluck it to wear. From afar to revere, this beautiful flower is so rare that it is fitting to dwell only in golden palaces, but often one yearns to own it."

What do you think of it?

Chit Maung

He asked, "What do you think of it?," but the poem was written as if not addressed directly to me, but rather as if it were just his challenge to U Hpay Nge in a contest of poetic skill.

In thinking over his query, "What do you think of it?" I could not very well say, "What's there about it?" and if someone were to ask me, "What do you mean?" I would have had to admit my utter confusion. In the end, I finally decided there was nothing personal in his poem, because at the time I was studying the Kogan Pyo, a very difficult epic poem, and he had been helping me with it. So I merely noted this latest development as a lesson in the art of turning poetry into clear prose and, disregarding the "What do you think of it?" continued simply to respect him as my teacher.

My gratitude and admiration for someone teaching me thus from a distance grew day by day. In other letters, too, it became very clear how earnest he was in wanting to spread knowledge to others.

CHAPTER 4

FIRST MEETING

It was surprising that we came to know each other with mutual respect and admiration through letters, and yet we had no desire to meet. After all, why should a writer for a newspaper need to meet the editor? The writer would only want to see the work in print, and the editor would only be interested in getting the article sent to him. Whenever I went to Yangon, I never thought of meeting him and regarded our relationship as something based on common interests.

Then the *Myanmar Alin* came out with a column on "Today's Thoughts" for which I sent off five short contributions just for fun, and they all appeared in the paper. A letter came asking for more, so off and on I would dash off something but could not send longer articles. By then I was working with a women's organization in my town and was busy with this work, and even my letters to him became sporadic. The "Do Bama Asi-ayon,"[1] a nationalist organization, opened a branch in our town, and, as a member of the women's representatives of that organization, I became busier. Political leaders, "Thakin,"[2] from Yangon often came to Bogalay, and I would be busy with arranging their public talks, even giving speeches myself, and so very often I failed to answer or write to him.

My father worked for the British, so his employers were quite upset that I should be so active in political work and gave him a hard time. My father did not forbid me, but hinted that it might be dangerous work. However, he was quite happy to see me spend my money in hosting many meals for the visiting politicians. I worked heart and soul to support those who were working with such sincerity for the sake of our country, and through my work of that period the political leaders of today came to know me well.

After the politicians left, they went to the *Myanmar Alin* offices to give their news, and some of them would mention my name to U Chit Maung and say how active I was. He wrote that since he learned of my involvement in politics, he had stopped asking me for regular contributions, and that he fully supported me. He said he was planning to translate the story of the Chinese girl revolutionary Shi Min for the paper, to encourage me.

In that letter, he wrote:

> *The appeals of the [arrested] Thakin have reached the High Court. The people of our country still do not know that they should respect and admire political prisoners. Not only that, most of them blame and condemn them, so in order to change their minds and to encourage you, Ma Tin Tin, and to*

[1] The "We Burmans Association," formed in 1935 by the student leaders.

[2] Politically dissident students adopted the form of address "Thakin," or "master," in front of their names in reaction against the British, who had insisted on being addressed as "Thakin."

strengthen your political views, I decided to translate the story of Shi Min, but so far I have done only the preface. But it should soon be finished to be published in the paper, and I hope it will encourage you to be more than ever active in politics. Also of course, I hope the readers will be moved by Shi Min's story so that men will learn to raise their fists with patriotic spirit and women to be inspired by nationalistic fervor.

But I wonder if I will be successful as I am bad at translating, worse with words, have no time to spare, and all around me my friends sleep and snore, and I, too, more than once or twice, have dozed off at my desk while pondering all this!

Chit Maung

As his letter was so supportive of my work, I sent a reply of thanks.

While I was caught up in the social welfare and political work of my town, suddenly Father began coughing up blood and was diagnosed with tuberculosis and rushed to the General Hospital in Yangon. The specialists there recommended that he be moved to Meikhtila in the dry zone, and I hurried to Yangon to see him before he left. After I had been in Yangon for about ten days, my family sent me the letters that had arrived for me in Bogalay. Among them was a letter from the paper urgently requesting an article for a special issue. I had no idea whether there was still time.

I often suffered dizzy spells, and after my father left for Meikhtila, I had stayed on in Yangon to be treated at the Indo Burma Clinic on Sule Pagoda Road, which happened to be next door to the *Myanmar Alin* office. Every morning I was going to the clinic, but so far felt no need to meet my editor friend. That morning, since I had his letter in my hand, I stood for a minute looking over at the paper's office before I went into the clinic. As I was sitting in the reception room, chatting to the young Japanese lady doctor, I noticed a telephone on the counter. I excused myself and immediately went to the counter and, after looking up the number in the telephone book, called *Myanmar Alin.*

"Who would you like to speak to?" the man answering the phone from the editorial desk asked.

"I would like to speak to the editor, U Chit Maung," I replied.

"This is he. Who is this speaking, please?"

"I'm Ma Tin Tin. I am in Yangon, and I received your letter only just now, the one asking for an article. I just wanted to know if there is still time and ..."

Before I could finish, he eagerly interrupted.

"Where are you calling from? When did you arrive in Yangon?"

"I'm calling from the Indo Burma Clinic. I got to Yangon ..."

"I was just about to go home for lunch and turned back to answer the phone ... I'm coming over, wait for me."

He hung up as soon as he said these words, so I went back to my chair. The doctor said goodbye to me and went upstairs. The reception area was deserted. I took up the *Rangoon Gazette* newspaper from the coffee table and idly glanced through it, waiting for him.

I had no idea he was standing behind me until the druggist working behind a far counter looked over at me and jerked his chin towards him. I turned and saw: a

gaunt face with thick glasses, a worn and shapeless *taik-pon*[3] of rough *pinni*,[4] a faded silk *longyi*,[5] and a very thin body of a starving ascetic.

"So you are Ma Tin Tin?" he asked, and I realized it was U Chit Maung, editor.

Looking at his gaunt cheeks and grey hair, I decided he was someone in his late thirties, fast approaching his forties, but, at the same time, I reflected that the dignity and seriousness of his expression might also make him appear older. The penetrating eyes behind the thick glasses and the broad brow told of a high intellect and a brilliant mind. Those were the only things that saved him from looking entirely the religious recluse. His face held no keen expression whatsoever, and the gloomy look of it drove away all aspects of youth from him.

His clothes looked shabby, but he was dressed neatly; because of his worn cotton jacket and faded *longyi*, he seemed to be a man who cared nothing for his looks. If I were to judge by his clothes, I would have said that this was a man who could not afford to have even a five- or ten-*kyat*[6] note in his pockets. In his hand he held an old-fashioned Burmese parasol of cloth and bamboo, and he was wearing rough leather slippers, both normal items of use for monks. Indeed, who would believe this man to be educated in Western subjects, as he looked exactly like a Hpon-gyi Lu Dwet,[7] a monk who has returned to the secular life.

I looked at him for a moment and then offered him a seat. I quickly noted the look of surprise on his face at my fashionable attire and make-up, as if I were dressed for a special occasion.

"I am very happy to meet you, U Chit Maung. I have been in Yangon for some time, and I'm staying with a nurse of this clinic. I've been consulting a doctor here, and I only got your letter today sent on by my family, and so I rang to ask if it were too late for the article you wanted."

He did not look at me but stared at the cement floor. He sat very still as if he were lost in thought.

"The special issue has been done, thank you. Do please look after your health and rest well. I did not know you were coming to Yangon, and when I did not receive a reply, I was worried that you might be ill. So, since you have finished studying the *Kogan Pyo* and the sixty *Sutras Pyo*, what do you plan to study now?"

I had never heard such a gentle and gracious voice before. By his voice alone, you could judge him to be a man without anger, greed, or vanity, a man of integrity and peace.

"I thought I'd study the *Thanwa Ya Pyo*, but I don't have the book yet, I thought I'd buy it today. Is that more difficult than the *Kogan*?"

"Yes, it's equally hard. May I request you, don't buy this book, I would like to give it to you."

"Do you have an extra copy?"

"No, but it's easy enough to get. Are there any other books you want?"

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[3] A long-sleeved, collarless jacket open at the front and with simple cloth buttons.

[4] A reddish or brown unbleached, hand-woven cotton worn by nationalists.

[5] Unisex word for "waist garment," a tube of fabric knotted at the waist. A woman's waist garment is called a *htamein*, and the man's is *pasoe*.

[6] Burmese currency. One hundred *pya* make one *kyat*.

[7] Misfits in society.

"I have no idea which books to buy. I thought I'd go to the bookshops like Hanthawaddy, Pyi Gyi Mandaing, and Zabu Meikswe to look for some Burmese titles."

"Where are you staying now?"

"Number 145, Fiftieth Street."

"On behalf of the country and *Myanmar Alin*, may I tell you how much we are indebted to you for the articles you have contributed?"

I was so shocked I thought I would fall from my chair. I was the one who should be thanking him: I have files at home thick with his letters in both Burmese and English, telling me about literature, poetry, and the classics, and these had been written even while he had a busy career. Only I knew how much I owed him, and now, hearing him thank me, I felt very uncomfortable.

"If the articles did some good for the country, it is not the writer who should be thanked: you, U Chit Maung, you urged me to write, and you supported me, taught me, and it's only because of your kindness that my articles were ever written. If anyone should thank you, it is I. I should be the one to be grateful."

He sat unmoving and silent as if he had nothing to say, still staring at the floor. Time passed, and he sat there for nearly half an hour without saying a word. I felt *ah-nar*[8] to be using the clinic's reception room like this, as if it were my private sitting room, but he sat rooted to his chair. I racked my brains trying to think of something to say to him, but to no avail. Besides, I wanted to go home, but felt I could not just get up and leave. I worried what the people of the clinic would think of us sitting there together in complete silence. He acted as if there were no need to speak to me, a person who was sitting right next to him, so I was hesitant to continue talking to him.

Nearly one hour passed, and he still sat there without a word. I made up my mind that even though he might think me rude, I had better make moves as if I were leaving, so I clicked my handbag open and shut a couple of times and, shifting in my seat as if about to get up, I said, "So, I'll get to this clinic about ten tomorrow morning. You can leave the book here, thank you so much."

"I'll come over and give it to you," he said, and still sat there as if he did not notice my body language.

For me to get up first would be very impolite since I was not the person who had come to see him. I should leave only after him, or we should leave together. As the minutes passed, I began to wonder what sort of a man this was. The doctors were all back in their offices, having returned from lunch, and as they walked past they had glanced out of the corners of their eyes at the two of us still sitting silently in our chairs. By the minute, I became more uneasy. The words I longed to say, "May I go?" would not leave my lips. I kept wishing desperately for him to leave. As time went on, he still did not give any sign of moving, sitting there with quiet dignity while staring now at the tabletop. The footsteps of the doctors as they went about their work sounded as if they were telling me to go. If it were my house, he could sit there the whole day if he wanted to, but finally I had to do something I had never done before: to be rude enough to dismiss a visitor.

"So, U Chit Maung, let's meet again tomorrow, my friends are waiting for lunch at home so please excuse me. And you, too ... "

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[8] To feel badly about taking advantage of or upsetting others.

At this, he said, "All right," and swiftly led the way out of the clinic. I was still feeling embarrassed to have been so rude, but what I could not understand was that he had got up and left with an air of sudden and welcome release.

Luckily, the next morning I saw him right at the entrance to the clinic. He was dressed exactly as he had been yesterday, and even after just two meetings he had become a familiar figure to me. I did not ask him in but stood a few minutes thanking him for the book he had handed to me. He hung his head and stood there without a word, so I went on to say that, as the book looked new, did he buy it and could I pay the cost? In response to which he still stayed silent, so I dared not ask again, but saying "thank you" a few times more, I made as if to go into the clinic. Only then he asked if I had bought any more books. I said no, and he said that he would make a list of books I should have and bring it the next morning to this place. I said thank you again and, firmly saying goodbye, went into the clinic. Even this exchange took about half an hour.

The next day I arrived early at the clinic with my nurse friend as she had something to do in the morning. After getting my injection,[9] I was free to go home, but as he had said he would bring the book list, I sat down to wait for him. Later, to give up my seat to new arrivals, I went to stand by the entrance. He turned up a few minutes later.

"How are you, Ma Tin Tin?"

"I'm better, thank you."

"Here's the list ... when will you go to the bookshops?"

"I'm waiting for a horse cab; I think I'll go right now."

"Are you going alone? Isn't there anyone with you?"

"No, I don't need to bring along anyone, I can go on my own."

"That's not right, I don't believe a girl on her own is safe in Yangon."

"Is that so?"

"I would like to come with you to the bookshops, I'm always happy to go there. I want to choose myself the books you should read ... "

He hesitated and did not say anything more.

I had no doubt that he really wanted to make sure that I was safe, and his saying he wanted to choose the books himself was truly because of his desire to help, and so I naturally thought he wanted to come with me. He sounded kind, and to go about with such a dignified man as him was not a problem for me, but if anyone should see us, people might gossip, and I did not want that. Moreover, what would the doctors think if they saw us climb into the same cab together? I did not know what to say. Since I had come to know him, he had been encouraging me and teaching me so much that, although I felt uncomfortable, I thought I should not refuse his kind offer regardless of what people might say. So I said, "If you can come with me, U Chit Maung, please do so. I would be most grateful."

"No please, I cannot come with you, it won't do."

"Excuse me?"

"It's bad enough that I'm standing here talking to you. I have never been on such friendly terms with any woman, and my friends know this, so if they see me with you they will tease me and laugh at me. It would damage my good name if they do that. I've never had anything to do with women, and so I think it would be impossible for me to come ... "

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[9] In Myanmar, getting an injection is considered the best treatment for all ills.

"You ...? What ...?"

"So, I was going to say how sorry I am that I can't come with you."

"Right, then, U Chit Maung, why did you say you wanted to come with me if you felt that to be seen with a person like me would damage your well-earned reputation? I understand perfectly now that you have explained your problem, but rest assured there is nothing to be sorry about for not coming with me. Only I can know how relieved I am that you could not accompany me. Thank you so very much, U Chit Maung ... please excuse me."

With that I climbed into the cab that had stopped for me and left him standing there. I felt icy cold all over and had to try hard to remember what I had said to him as a parting shot. I had acceded to what I thought was a request to come with me, in spite of feeling uncomfortable about it. It should have made me happy to have that issue resolved, but the way he had explained his views on *his* reputation without thinking about mine made me furious. I simmered all the way home.

When he had said he wanted to come with me to the bookshops and had paused, he was in fact thinking about his own difficulty, while I had thought that he was hesitating about asking my permission, and so, wanting to be nice, I had asked him to come. Even if I had been the one to first beg him to come with me, he could have given a dozen polite reasons not to do so. What happened had not made me think well of him, for it showed him as a man who had no female relationships of any kind[10] and who implied I should admire and respect him for this. I only thought him a strange man but could not imagine exactly what *sort* of a strange man he was.

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[10] It is a point of honor for men, and to a much higher degree for women, that they not be familiar with unrelated members of the opposite sex.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT SORT OF STRANGE MAN WAS HE?

I stayed home for three days because it was not necessary for me to be given another treatment until the fourth day after my injection. On the evening of the third day, at about 7:00, while I was resting on my bed, my hostess called me from the front room. I was astounded to see him sitting with great dignity in the parlor.

"Oh, it's you, U Chit Maung," I greeted him while trying to recover my composure, and then sat down in a chair. During the past three days he seemed to have become more haggard, his cheeks even more sunken, and he looked visibly upset, all of which I noticed as soon as I saw him. To break the silence, I asked, "Did you come by cab?"

"I came on foot, Ma Tin Tin. I did not see you come to the clinic, so I thought you might have left for home."

"Oh, really? Did you go to the clinic?"

"Yes, I kept going there to ask, but they just said you didn't come."

"Actually, I don't need to go until tomorrow, as I get my treatment every four days."

"I wrote a letter for you," he said, and, taking it from his pocket, handed it to me.

Ma Tin Tin,

What a blunder I have made, Ma Tin Tin, what a horrible blunder. My dilemma is one I alone knew about, and I could have kept silent and not have been so inconsiderate as to blurt it out to you, thus upsetting you so much. I only realized it when it was too late; there is a proverb, isn't there, that fools repent only when it is too late?

I did so want to accompany you, but as I could not, I should have had the brains to give an excuse and thus avoid upsetting you. And I, I would not have to bear this great burden of despair as a result of having seen how I have upset you ...

It is my fault, Ma Tin Tin, entirely my fault. I have been suffering from the pain of my guilt since you drove away that day, and until I learn from you that you have forgotten and forgiven ... until I know it, I will continue to suffer.

Can you ever forgive me, Ma Tin Tin?

Chit Maung

I finished reading the letter, put it on the table, and placed the key I was holding on it. He wore an expression of such despair and guilt, as if he deeply regretted everything. I could see how desperate he felt by the look on his face.